



A Rose Grows in Lagos

After discovering her son had autism, Dr. Yinka Akindayomi of Nigeria made it her lifelong mission to study the mental disorder, spread awareness, and change perceptions on employment possibilities for youth with autism.

“My son was always different,” recalled Dr. Yinka Akindayomi. Akinyele Akindayomi was officially diagnosed with autism at the age of three. “Confusion was my first reaction. There was also anger, uncertainty, and a loss for words.” That was in 1987. Today, Dr. Akindayomi is the director and founder of the Children’s Developmental Centre (CDC), a Lagos-based facility that provides diagnostic assessments, treatment, vocational training, and other social services to more than 600 children and young adults with autism spectrum disorders. CDC is using a United States African Development Foundation (USADF) grant to expand this ground-breaking program that helps autistic youths acquire job skills in order to earn sustainable livelihoods.



Members of Tea Breakers (above right), a Nigerian catering business that employs autistic youths, sell homemade baked goods to Lagos residents.

Throughout Akindayomi’s career, the resilient program director has fought against society’s “prejudice, ignorance, and indifference” towards autism spectrum disorders. When her son was diagnosed with autism, the common misconception was that autism didn’t exist in Africa. Akindayomi works to shatter society’s misunderstandings about developmental disabilities.

Five years ago, CDC created a small catering business called “Tea Breakers” that employs autistic young adults. The program has achieved enormous success and received great publicity in Nigeria. This one-of-a-kind program creates an opportunity for autistic young adults to earn incomes and set up savings accounts. It is expanding its services offered to include scented candles, jewelry making, and tie dying. The Tea Breakers have amazed parents, staff, and community members who once thought autistic young adults were incapable of holding jobs.

CDC turned to USADF in 2009 with the goal of improving the standard of living of children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders by improving its planning, reporting and managerial capabilities. Grant funds were used to hire local Nigerian experts to train CDC staff in management and accounting. According to Akindayomi, these newly acquired skills have become the “life line of the organization.”

“It is amazing to watch the staff here shower these special children with love and attention, teaching them, building them. It reminds me of some roses my mother got from Ghana once,” said Jumbo

Shekinah, a physiotherapy trainee at CDC. “People said they wouldn’t do well here in Nigeria, but to everyone’s amazement, with extra patience, love and attention, they blossomed quite beautifully. It is the same for these children. With a little extra love and attention, they can grasp that which you want them to. The little things you watch them achieve leave a big smile on your face.”

Children with developmental disabilities are pushed to the edge of Nigerian society, dismissed as dependent upon others for survival, and considered incapable of ever entering the work force. Dr. Akindayomi’s leadership, charisma, and perseverance have given autistic children a better chance of avoiding poverty and marginalization.

USADF is an independent United States Government Agency dedicated to helping Africa’s most marginalized and underserved populations. USADF partners with African led and managed groups to address social issues and increase economic growth in 21 sub-Saharan African countries. To learn more about this grant and other USADF projects, visit www.usadf.gov.